

COMMENTARY

Changing your relationship to money can boost your well-being

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My father was a radiologist. He was also a high-ticket gadget fan. In our Long Island neighborhood, he had the first riding lawn mower, the first TV, the best array of power tools, and an enviable powder blue 1957 Lincoln Continental convertible. Then one day he turned the car on in the garage and killed himself. I was 13 years old, and although I could not articulate it at the time, I learned a big lesson about the emptiness of money, gadgets, and status. His story, I believe, is not unique. According to the Index of Social Health (web site: www.fordham.edu/whatnew/1997-98/socialhealth.html),¹ per capita income has increased 62% since 1970, and yet, quality of life has declined by 51%. "Affluenza," the disease of "too muchness," is a US epidemic. Drs Dunn and Rosson tell us about the deliberate steps that they took out of the prison of materialistic success.

Would you be surprised if I told you that money might be an area where physicians can experience great healing and transformation? If so, consider this. As coauthor of the book *Your Money or Your Life*,² I would like to suggest 2 ways in which physicians can heal their relationships with money.

First, observe and evaluate whether your financial life is contributing to your joy and integrity. The changes you make should come from a deep well of inner honesty, not from being told by your financial planner that you must tighten your belt here or accept some risks elsewhere.

Second, demystify this thing called money. Just because we have money does not mean that we know what it is. Our socially programmed emotions, the din of the consumer culture, and the unquestioned logic of the market that "more is always better" confuse even the smartest of us. What is money, really? It is our life energy—the hours we invest in earning, managing, spending, donating, and worrying about it. Our real hourly wage may, in fact, be modest, considering all the extra nonwork hours we spend dealing with money and the cost of educating ourselves for our professional lives. As human beings, as souls, we must always ask ourselves: "Is the trade of our life energy worth it? Are we more than our careers? Does our allocation of time reflect our deepest values?" Seen this way, money becomes a powerful lever for rebalancing our lives.

I am moved by the transformation that Dunn and Rosson experienced—not just for them, but for what it could mean for our world. Physicians, with their special capacity to intervene decisively and intimately in the lives of millions of people, are potentially powerful allies in this vital work of increasing the financial sanity in America. Just as they have taken on gun control, domestic violence, and nuclear weapons as public health issues, physicians can convincingly address the false assumptions about wealth and well-being endemic to our culture.

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References

- 1 *Index of Social Health*. New York: Fordham University; 1999.
- 2 Dominguez J, Robin V. *Your Money or Your Life: Transforming Your Relationship With Money and Achieving Financial Independence*. New York: Penguin Books; 1993.

Moments in medical history

It is the duty of the doctor to preserve, not only health and life, but joy of living, and if most of us had to make our choice we would take the latter. Why ward off death if in the attempt we kill living?

Warfield T Longcope, *Johns Hopkins Hospital Bulletin*

I came to see that I placed too much importance on work and discovered that the real value in my life came from relationships with family and friends. Our lives can easily become rote: we can often act like somnambulists rather than being fully awake.

Robert Pope, *Illness and Healing*